EVERY BARRIER DOWN
July 18, 2004

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 4
Acts 10:1–16, 34–35

"What God has made clean, you must not call profane."
Acts 10:15 (NRSV)

Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it.
Love every leaf, every ray of God's light.
Love the animals, love the plants, love everything.
If you love everything you will perceive the divine mystery in things.
Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day.
And you will come at last to love the whole world with an all-embracing love.
Fyodor Dostoevsky

The mark of a good teacher is the ability to express big and complicated ideas simply and in a way people like you and me can understand. Robert McAfee Brown was a great teacher of theology and ethics, a Presbyterian through and through. He was talking about the behavioral and social and, inevitably, the political effects of Christianity, and in one of the last books he wrote before he died, he told a compelling story. I can't improve on it so let me simply read it to you.

> It is my first communion service after ordination. It is taking place on the after gun turret of a U.S. Navy destroyer during World War II, and I am there because I am a Navy chaplain. There is only room for three communicants at a time to come forward and receive the elements. The first three to respond to the invitation are a lieutenant commander, captain of the vessel; a fireman's apprentice, about as low as one can be in the ordinary naval hierarchy; and a steward's mate, who, because he is black, is not even included in the normal naval hierarchy; all blacks can do in the then Jim Crow Navy is wait on the tables where the white officers eat.
>
> An officer, a white enlisted man, a black enlisted man—day by day they eat in separate mess halls. There are no circumstances in which they could eat together at a Navy table. But at the Lord's Table, not even Navy regulations can dictate who eats with whom. For this one

> moment—as is true during no other moments on shipboard—they are equals, and they are at the same table.

Brown concludes: “Holy Communion is usually described as the ‘highest’ spiritual experience Christians can have. That particular Holy Communion was a liberation experience as well—liberation for a moment from the structures that otherwise separated those three men, and a liberation enacting in advance the kind of new structures that would someday prevail even in the U.S. Navy” (*Spirituality and Liberation*, pp. 142–143).

Jesus Christ changes things. If the gospel is about anything, it is about transformation, change, conversion. Jesus Christ changes human hearts, human attitudes, human perspectives, human behavior, and inevitably human customs, conventions, traditions. The most dramatic change, or conversion, that Jesus inspires is in the lowering of the barriers that separate people, barriers that define people as insiders and outsiders, acceptable and unacceptable, clean and unclean, neighbors and strangers. Jesus Christ, Christians believe, is God’s love incarnate, working in the world to heal, reconcile, bringing people together into healthy and peaceful and life-giving relationship with God and with one another. Jesus Christ changes things.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf, a Croation, has written an important book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, that discusses the concept of the “other” in human history. Everyone, every nation, every race, needs an “other” in order to know and be itself. Everyone needs an outsider in order to feel like an insider. In the preface, Volf recalls the days in 1993 when Serbian fighters invaded his native Croatia and were herding Croatians into concentration camps, murdering Croatian people, looting homes, burning churches, and raping Croatian women. Volf was delivering a lecture on reconciliation, and at the end someone stood up and asked, “Yes, all well and good, but can you embrace a Cetnik?” which was the name for the hated Serbian fighters. Volf, who served in the Croatian army, thought for a while and answered, “No, I cannot. But as a follower of Jesus Christ, I should be able to.” The result was the book *Exclusion and Embrace*, in which Volf maintains that the cross of Jesus Christ erases all definitions of “otherness.”

It is a revolutionary idea. And from the beginning it has challenged something deeply a part of human nature.

There is a great Bible story about it in the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the history book of the early Christian church. It is the story of the gospel of Jesus Christ confronting social and religious convention and inspiring people to change. It is a story of two conversions.

The first conversion is Cornelius. Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army of occupation, stationed in the Jewish city of Caesarea. He is a decent man, but he is a Gentile, definitely an outsider. He is, by Jewish law and scripture, unclean, not because of something he is doing, but because of who he is: a Gentile. A good Jew cannot have anything to do with him. Shaking hands is forbidden. Eating at the same table is unthinkable. Cornelius has a vision in which he hears a voice instructing him to send to Joppa for a man by the name of Simon Peter, a Jew and a follower of Jesus. All the first Christians were Jews, and they simply assumed that if Gentiles wanted to be Christians, they would have to become Jews first.

Peter, in the meantime, is praying, becomes hungry, and has an even stranger vision. Something like a sheet is lowered to the roof of his house, and in the sheet are all sorts of creatures and reptiles and birds. A voice says, “Kill and eat.” Peter is horrified. Everything in that sheet is forbidden by his religion, by Holy Scripture. Ever since he was a tiny tot, Peter has had drilled into him the importance of the dietary laws: “Every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth is an abomination, it shall not be eaten. Whatever goes on its belly, whatever has many feet—it is an abomination” (see William Sloane Coffin, *Courage to Love*, p. 40). This is not only a diet thing (Peter is definitely not on the Atkins diet!); these dietary laws, from what is called the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus, are what gave and maintained Jewish identity down through the centuries, often times in situations where that identity was threatened. There is more at stake here than protein. At stake is identity. In the process, the Holiness Code separates everything and everyone into two categories—acceptable and unacceptable, clean and unclean—and everything on that sheet is unacceptable and unclean. “By no means, Lord,” Peter says. “I’m not touching that stuff.”

And then he hears the voice again: “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” That is a revolutionary idea. That, someone said, is for Peter a world-changing idea.

Cornelius’s men arrive just then, invite Peter to accompany them to Caesarea to see this unclean Gentile. Peter, his mind still swimming with the whole new idea, decides to trust the voice, break with convention, and go—and at this point you begin to see two separate and profound conversions happening.

And then Peter speaks and says something utterly stunning: “I now know that God shows no partiality.” That was absolutely contrary to everything Peter believed. Peter’s solid foundation, his entire worldview, was seriously shaking.

So Peter baptizes Cornelius, this unclean Gentile, and returns to Jerusalem, where the church leaders have already heard what he has done and call him on the carpet. “Why in the world did you go to a Gentile, Peter, an unclean pagan? What were you thinking when you sat down at his table and ate with him?”

So Peter patiently explains how God seems to be orchestrating this and when he saw Cornelius’ sincerity and faith he decided that he could not hinder God. The assembled leaders are silent.

But you can bet that some of those leaders weren’t happy, weren’t at all convinced that God was doing such a new thing that all the old certainties, all the old and precious customs and conventions, all the comfortable ways they had organized the world into clean and unclean, righteous and sinner, insider and outsider, had to be reexamined and changed.

Change is not easy, personally—I can testify to that. I don’t like change. I don’t even like it when someone rearranges the living room furniture. And when it is religion, change can be excruciating. Religion has an affinity for certainty.

> Though the earth should change,
> though the mountains shake
> God is our refuge and strength.
> (Psalm 46)
>
> “Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today, and forever.”

The more change, uncertainty, and turmoil in the world, the more precious the certainties and unchanging truth of faith become to us.

The problem is that we have a way of expanding the certainties of God’s love and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ to include the forms and structures of our particular brand of religion. And just like Peter had to struggle with his own certainties, you and I can feel profoundly threatened by the suggestion that God challenges us to reexamine and sometimes change what we have been embracing so tightly for all these years.

Sometimes change is much more difficult for religious institutions.

Martin Marty once quipped that the last seven words of the institutional church will be “We never did it that way before!”

For centuries, the church was certain that the Bible clearly defined a secondary and subservient role in the church—and society at large—for women. Slowly, slowly, change came; old certainties were reexamined and

discarded in favor of new truth. But not until the twentieth century did most of the churches acknowledge the equal leadership status of women, and in the year 2004 it is sobering to remember that the two largest religious organizations in the country—the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention—still do not.

For centuries, the church was certain that the Bible clearly defined a secondary and subservient role for people of color; to its everlasting shame, it defended the institution of slavery as a reflection of God's will. And to its everlasting credit, from within the church came the faithful and brave voices of those who remembered the gospel of reconciliation and called the church to change and to get up off its comfortable pews and into the city streets and courthouses and classrooms and change the world.

We find ourselves confronted today with old certainties and the old question of reexamination and change and conversion over an issue more divisive than any other since slavery, namely homosexuality. We Presbyterians have been talking about it and arguing about it since 1978— that's twenty-six years. Our denomination, along with most of the other churches, has on its books rules and guidelines that prohibit discrimination in the church against anyone for reasons of race, gender, worldly condition, or sexual orientation. But we also have rules that prohibit the ordination of self-affirming gay and lesbian people or anyone who is sexually active outside of marriage to the offices of Deacon, Elder, and Minister of the Word and Sacrament. Some of us in the Presbyterian church think that's not only inconsistent legally but also deeply flawed theologically and biblically. Some of us deeply believe that the Holy Spirit is challenging the church to reexamine its old certainties, as was the case in the matters of women and race, and to reflect something of that radical inclusivity that Simon Peter himself finally embraced and expressed in regard to the unclean Gentile Cornelius.

We are divided. We are at a painful impasse. Good friends, colleagues, brothers and sisters in Christ, line up on both sides, and it will take a monumental amount of understanding and grace to keep our church together.

Those of us who want the church to change—and not for a moment do I assume that includes everyone here—need to be very clear about our reasons. This is not about social liberalism or political correctness. This is about the Bible and the church and the work of the Spirit agitating, pushing, prodding the church to change.

Peter and later Paul had to learn to read the Bible in new ways because of Jesus Christ and in light of their undeniable experience. Peter knew what the Bible said about unclean food and eating with unclean Gentiles. He

could proof text with the best of them. But with Cornelius on his knees in front of him, clearly the recipient of God's Spirit, and the Spirit agitating him all night long with those strange dreams, he had to change and read scripture in new ways.

Paul knew what the Bible said about the subservient role of women when he met Lydia one day in Philippi and baptized her and went home with her and stayed in her home (can you imagine what they said about that?) and made her a leader in the church.

So, no, the Bible nowhere condones homosexual practice and in a very few passages seems to condemn it. But we are learning that even in those places where homosexual practice is condemned, it is because of the repugnance both Jews and Christians felt about the Greco-Roman practice of older men preying on young boys and the even older Middle Eastern custom of homosexual rape as a way to humiliate your defeated enemy.

The topic is before us whether we want it to be or not: in the church, in the matter of ordination, and in the society, in the question of whether or not to extend marriage status or rights similar to marriage to committed, monogamous same-sex couples.

Peter had to reexamine his own certainties and learn how to read the Bible in new ways because of his experience with Cornelius. And so many of us have had to reexamine certainties drilled into us since childhood and read the Bible differently and change our minds about this.

There are many good books on the topic, representing all points of view. One of the best is edited by Robert Brawley, a McCormick Seminary professor and member of this congregation: *Biblical Ethics and Homosexuality: Listening to Scripture*. In it there is an essay by Jeffrey Siker, a professor at Loyola–Marymont, which spoke to me and reflected the spirit of Acts 10 as well as my own experience. Professor Siker writes,

> Many of us have been moved and persuaded by the spirited testimony and prophetic lives of self-affirming gay and lesbian Christians to accept loving and monogamous same-sex unions as a faithful expression of God's intention for those people who are gay and lesbian, even though we used to consider such relationships as inherently sinful and against God's purposes.

Two saints of this church died last week. Both understood their Christian faith in terms of the change it effects in personal lives—attitudes and behavior—and in the world—in the customs, mores, conventions by which we live. Jennifer Guentert, who worked for justice and compassion for homeless women and affordable housing for poor people, and David

Hooker, Deacon, Elder, Trustee, faithful servant, hard worker for the Presbytery of Chicago, devoted Presbyterian, faithful Christian who happened to be gay. David never missed church, loved God deeply, and loved the denomination that wasn't sure what to do with him and his faith. David died last week, and we will miss him. The Presbyterian church will miss him.

And while we continue this conversation, and while we struggle with our own certainties about this and other matters, and while God's Holy Spirit continues to push and prod and lead and inspire us to be as welcoming and accepting and inclusive as our Lord Jesus Christ was, I am sure of one thing that does not change, and that is God's love in Jesus Christ that comes to each and every one of us, gay–straight, married–single, old–young, conservative–liberal.

Jennifer Guentert's and David Hooker's faithful lives and deaths last week reminded me that God's Spirit is always working in the church and in the world and in individual lives like theirs to bring about change and that, more often than not, the change that needs to happen is in attitudes and customs and rules about which we have been certain. Jennifer's and David's faithful lives and deaths reminded me that at the end of the day, David and Jennifer, you and I, all of us, Peter and Cornelius too, come to God, not with a list of credentials and accomplishments, not wearing our purity like a badge; we come, at the last, with empty hands to a merciful and gracious God whose love is beyond our understanding.

> Just as I am without a plea,
> But that thy blood was shed for me,
> Just as I am.
> Thou wilt receive,
> Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
>
> Just as I am,
> Thy love unknown,
> Has broken every barrier down:
> Now to be thine, yea, thine alone,
> O Lamb of God, I come, I come!

Amen.